

From research objects to research subjects: Reflections on the politics of researching asylum

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Researching asylum: A thorny political issue

- Asylum: a thorny political issue
 - Highly charged (racism, nationalism, economics)
 - Multiple investments (political and public; global, European, national, local)
- Researching a thorny political issue
 - Careful yet genuine representation
 - Respecting research subjects
 - Critical diagnosis and critical intervention

Researching asylum: Addressing an exclusionary politics

- How to do research that intervenes critically yet carefully in addressing the exclusionary politics of asylum?
 - Diagnosing an exclusionary politics
 - Intervening in an exclusionary politics
 - Objectivist interventions
 - Subjectivist interventions
 - Political interventions
 - Drawing on different projects throughout talk

Diagnosing an exclusionary politics I: Securitisation

- The securitisation and criminalisation of asylum
 - Legal process
 - Bureaucratic process
 - Discursive process
- Discursive process (narrative and practice)
 - Conflation of asylum with 'illegal immigration'
 - Narratives of fear both inform and legitimise policy initiatives
 - Narratives often become self-fulfilling
- Securitisation, racialisation and scapegoating
 - Oppositional discursive representation of asylum (us/them)
 - Political exploitation of asylum (scapegoating)

Diagnosing an exclusionary politics II: Managed migration

- A progressive approach?
 - Opening up new migration routes (against pure restriction)
 - ‘Objective’ method for choosing between migrants
- Problems with ‘managed migration’
 - Migration – designated routes limited; increasing temporariness; precarity of ‘unwanted’ migrants
 - Asylum – ‘bogus’ versus ‘genuine’; increasing emphasis on provision of protection elsewhere; legitimate versus illegitimate routes to protection
 - Plays into securitisation and criminalisation of asylum

Intervening in an exclusionary politics I: Objectivist interventions

- Objectivism:
 - reality exists independent of our understanding of it
 - research is about gaining independent knowledge of a given phenomenon
- Asylum as an object of research:
 - Emphasis on numbers/statistics
 - Figures of asylum seekers; costs of asylum system
 - Measurement of policy outcomes
 - Effectiveness of policies in meeting specified aims
 - Costs/benefits of different policies

Intervening in an exclusionary politics II: Problems with objectivist interventions

- Critical objectivist interventions
 - Producing new statistics
 - Assessing policies in their own terms
- Problems with objectivist interventions
 - Risk getting caught up in ‘number games’?
 - Risk reproducing dominant ‘gaze’ on asylum (from the perspective of the ‘host’ community)

Intervening in an exclusionary politics III: Subjectivist interventions

- Subjectivism:
 - Knowledge is the product of our consciousness
 - Research is about presenting subjective understandings of a given phenomenon
- Asylum seekers as subjects in research
 - Emphasis on the experiences of asylum seekers
 - Asylum seekers as service users (action research)
 - Emphasis on integrating asylum seekers within the research process
 - Asylum seekers as researchers (participative research)

Intervening in an exclusionary politics IV: Problems with subjectivist interventions

- Critical subjectivist interventions
 - Produce a different 'gaze' on asylum
 - Empowerment of asylum seekers
- Problems with subjectivist interventions
 - Limited ability to challenge stated policy aims?
 - Asylum seekers reduced to asylum seekers rather than seen as people with a wider repertoire of experiences?

Intervening in an exclusionary politics V: Political Interventions

- Political interventions:
 - Knowledge is always ‘knowledge in context’
 - Produced knowledge intervenes in a field that is already politicised/depolicised
 - Hence the need for diagnosis as well as intervention
 - Research is about considering alternative ways of being
 - Focus on contestations of existing narratives and/or practices (political focus over focus on objective facts or subjective experiences)
 - Focus on the constitution of subjectivities that exceed or transcend the dominant ‘gaze’ on asylum (focus on subjectivities over focus on research objects/subjects)

Intervening in an exclusionary politics VI: Political Interventions

- Asylum seekers as active subjects?
 - Asylum seekers are social actors, occupying different positions
 - Gendered, racialised, sexualised subjectivities
 - But also located within specific social formations (presence within a locale: e.g. religious, educational and employment-based engagements)
 - Asylum seekers are active subjects who participate in various ways within different social formations
 - Subject position as asylum seeker is distinctive and has legal implications as a status that limits one's ability to demand certain rights
 - However, this status is not fixed nor is the social position of asylum seeker all-consuming

Intervening in an exclusionary politics VII: Political Interventions

- Asylum seekers as political subjects
 - Distinctiveness of 'the refugee' as a political figure has been theorised in detail
 - The refugee shows the limitations but also is central to the operation of an international system of nation-states
 - Where does the asylum seeker fit into this?
 - Asylum seeker as scapegoat figure:
 - » Scapegoats for the failures of political community (i.e. of the state's failure or inability to provide the protections that are demanded of it)
 - » Scapegoats who serve to mask or obscure the inevitable 'excesses' of a contained or territorial political community

Intervening in an exclusionary politics VIII: Political Interventions

- Asylum seekers as political subjects -cont.
 - How can we produce knowledge that challenges this articulation of asylum?
 - Approach asylum seekers as people with multiple subjectivities who occupy various subject positions
 - Examine the distinctive claims and enactments of asylum seekers across the various sites or locales that they engage
 - Draw out narratives and practices that contest dominant articulations of asylum seekers as ‘unauthorised’ and ‘unwanted’
 - Focus attention on subjectivities that do not fit the dominant ‘gaze’ (asylum seekers and their ‘allies’)

Conclusion: Re-thinking asylum

- How does a political intervention facilitate a re-thinking both of what asylum means and of what it means to research asylum?
 - A political intervention stresses the importance of critical diagnosis as well as careful intervention
 - The main objective of a political intervention is to challenge the dominant 'gaze' on asylum
 - A political intervention goes beyond viewing asylum seekers as 'active subjects' toward thinking of them as 'activist subjects' who act in solidarity with others
 - A political intervention potentially challenges some of our basic assumptions about political community